

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2024

Remarks to the United States Conference of Mayors and a Question-and-Answer Session

January 19, 2024

The President. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Thank you. Thank you very much. Please—please sit down.

My dad used to have an expression: Quit while you're ahead. *[Laughter]*

I tell you what, I can't tell you how pleased I am to have you all here, and I mean it. For some of you, this is not your first visit. I know the new mayors, obviously it is.

But you know, Mayor Schieve—thanks for that introduction and your leadership of this conference.

A special thanks to the CEO of the Conference of Mayors, Tom Cochran—Tommy, how you doing, pal?—*[applause]*—who began his distinguished tenure in 1969. God bless you, pal. *[Laughter]* It's hell turning 50, isn't it?

U.S. Conference of Mayors Chief Executive Officer and Executive Director Tom Cochran. We're the same age. And Mike Bloomberg is the same age too. *[Laughter]*

The President. All right. But neither one of us have his money. *[Laughter]*

Well, thank you all, and welcome to the White House. I mean that sincerely.

Today we get some good news: We just signed a bill to keep the Government open. I thought about it when I signed it—*[laughter]*—but you know, some days, that counts as progress. *[Laughter]*

As many of you know, I started my career as a local official back in Delaware. And I only ran for Senate because serving locally was too hard. *[Laughter]* They know where you live and they think you can solve problems that are beyond your authority.

And believe me—*[laughter]*—all kidding aside, you have enormous respect for the—I have enormous respect for the jobs you do. I really mean it. You can't go anywhere without people knowing what you're doing. You—they know where you live. And they think you can solve every problem. *[Laughter]* No, I'm serious.

The fact is, you're answering key questions people ask every day: Is my neighborhood safe? Is it going to be okay? Will this bus get me to work on time? You know, my kids—will they—they going to have a good future in this town? Am I able to stay in my hometown?

It matters. It matters what you do. Mayors get the job done. And I'm not being—I'm not just being solicitous. Those of you who've known me for a long time know that's been my view from the time I got here as a United States Senator.

That's why I've filled my administration with so many former mayors, including Keisha Lance Bottoms, Steve Benjamin—Steve, good to see you—Mitch Landrieu, Marty Walsh, Secretary Buttigieg.

Pete turned 30 today. *[Laughter]* He got—my wife is going to—we have—she has a tradition in her family. Five and girls and one—five sisters—and at everybody's birthday, you've got to sing "Happy Birthday." So stand up, and let's sing happy birthday.

[At this point, the President led the audience in singing "Happy Birthday" to Secretary of Transportation Peter P.M. Buttigieg.]

And those of you who know my wife know I'm not kidding. *[Laughter]*

By the way, I tell every young man that's telling me "I'm thinking of getting married" or something like—I say, "Look, I"—"You have any advice?" I said, "Yes, pick a family with five sisters or more." And they look at me, "What the hell is that all about?" I said: "It's really simple. That way, one of them always loves you. Not the same one." *[Laughter]* You always have somebody on your side.

I want to thank Tom—Tom Perez for being the point person for so long. Where are you, Tom? There you are. Stand up, Tom. And I know he spent several days this week meeting with many of you, and I hope you—he was able to answer all your questions, because he always answers mine. *[Laughter]*

Folks, I made a commitment to be a President for all Americans, whether you live in a—whether you voted for me or not. And I mean it sincerely. Whether it—I made a commitment to rebuild from the middle out and bottom up, not the top down—give everybody a little bit of breathing room.

And you know, it's kind of interesting that I—a lot of folks who voted every—against everything I've done, they're announcing all these great projects. *[Laughter]* I tell them—and by the way, as many in blue States as red States, you know, and red States as blue, for real, because they're all Americans.

And here's the deal——

[A cell phone in the audience rang.]

I know. I know. *[Laughter]* Tell the former President that I'm busy right now. *[Laughter]*

Look, but I always say, some of the most ardent critics of me are announcing these great programs. And I say I have one comment: See you at the groundbreaking. *[Laughter]*

Look, I've kept those commitments, and so have you. And I—look at what we've been able to accomplish together. That's what I would like to talk a little bit about today.

I'm not going to take a lot of your time, but the things that are on top of mind for you. Look, when I came to office, the pandemic was raging. The economy was reeling. Cities nationwide faced devastating budget cuts. And together, we turned things around. You turned them around. You turned them around.

It started with the American Rescue Plan: \$350 billion for State and local governments. Money to put cops back on the beat, teachers in the classroom, keep families in their homes—and train your workforces and get small businesses on their feet. Money directly to every single city in the country so you could decide how best to spend your money and meet your residents' needs without having to go through a statehouse or a Governor.

A lot of great Governors, a lot of statehouses. But you all know what you need better than anybody. I like it going directly to you. When I was a local official, I liked that a lot better. I liked the Delaware State Legislature when I was there. But guess what? They had—everybody had to get a piece of it—*[laughter]*—and my county wouldn't get what it needed. Any rate.

I followed that with the most significant investment in our Nation's infrastructure in generations: roads, bridges, railroads, ports, airports, public transit, clean water, high-speed internet, and so much more.

How can we have the best economy in the world if we don't have the best infrastructure in the world? Not a joke. We used to be number one in the world. You know what we rank now nationally—our infrastructure is rated worldwide? We're number 13. The United States of America is 13, from being number one. You can't lead the world unless you have the best infrastructure in the world.

Well, you're helping us change that. Now—now, we'll—we're going—on our way to leading the world again. Over four—40,000 new infrastructure projects announced to date and a hell of a lot more to come, with jobs now and jobs for the next decade.

I remember going through—remember we had Infrastructure Week? *[Laughter]* And then, we had Infrastructure Week. And then we had Infrastructure Week. And then we had—*[laughter]*. It never happened. Well, you've got an Infrastructure Decade. Because of you.

Just yesterday I was in Raleigh, North Carolina.

Audience member. Yes, sir.

The President. You've got it, man. *[Laughter]* Great city, by the way. *[Laughter]*

And we're investing \$3 billion in the entire State for high-speed internet by the end of the decade. And we're doing that in all 50 States.

You know, Franklin Roosevelt brought electricity to rural America. That's what he did, because it wasn't there. And he realized that it was necessary to equalize the country and to grow the whole country.

Well, we're bringing high-speed internet to everyone in America. Rural—it's the same thing, the same necessities, critical to our economy. How do you get by in a city, a State, a town, your home without accessing internet—affordable access—we're not leaving anybody behind.

Yesterday, in North Carolina, I also highlighted a \$1 billion we're investing in a new rail line from Raleigh to Richmond. And that's a billion dollars. It's going to create good-paying jobs, make travel faster, and it's going to improve the environment considerably by getting tens of thousands of cars off the road. Because every study shows, if you get a chance to go by electric rail and/or your car, you go by rail if it's the same time.

They've cut the point going from point A to point B. Look, right now is it takes about 3 hours to get that route. Cut it down to 2 hours. It changes everything.

And each of you could give examples of infrastructure projects of the one happening now in your States.

Look, with your help, we're also making the biggest investment in fighting climate change ever anywhere in the world—*[applause]*—in the world. We've got more to do.

Across your cities, we're working together to help small businesses install rooftop solar panels, electric buses—city fleets of all electric buses, planning—I just met with a lovely woman who knows a little bit about the environment, going to plant thousands of trees in her city, a million total—a million total. It's going to change the—protect against extreme heat and so much more.

My administration continues to work closely with you and your Governors and respond quickly to the wake of devastating floods, tornadoes, wildfires, and hurricanes.

By the way, when I started the job, I kept talking about the need for a deal with the environment. Said, "We don't have a problem." Anybody think climate is not a problem, raise your hand. *[Laughter]* Come on, man. *[Laughter]*

I've been around the world and on the ground with you, making sure to help strengthen the resilience and withstand the extreme weather and build back a stronger economy and bring back a stronger community. We're revitalizing fenceline communities smothered with the legacy of pollution. I grew up in one of those communities, and Delaware used to have the highest—one of the highest cancer rates in the Nation.

When we moved from Scranton—when jobs were eliminated in Scranton, we moved back to Delaware where my dad had been raised—to Claymont, Delaware, right on the border of Pennsylvania, that arc that goes up in it. More oil refineries than any place in the Nation, including Houston, at the time.

Well, guess what? Almost all my friends, including me, we had asthma. We'd go to—you know, my mom would drive us to the local school. It wasn't very far—a little Catholic school called Holy Rosary—up the Philadelphia pike. And if it was the first frost, you'd turn on the windshield wipers—this is the God's truth—and there'd be an oil slick in the window—an oil slick.

But you all come from places that have those alleys. You know—and we're promoting clean energy and industries of the future. Our workers are already drawing \$640 billion in private investment at home and—from home and around the world—\$640 billion. We're building factories. We're creating jobs here in America.

Let me give you one example. America invented the microchip, about as big as the tip of your little finger. Okay? We invented and—went to the Moon. We modernized it. We made it—it's necessary for everything from smartphones to dishwashers to automobiles. And over time, we went from producing 40 percent of the world's chips to producing less than 10 percent.

And that's when I signed the CHIPS and Science Act. I got on a plane—and maybe you thought I was a little nuts—and flew to South Korea. And I said, "Why—why don't you come invest and build us those computer chips in America" so we didn't have a supply chain problem. And went around—well, guess what? They did.

I asked the—I asked Samsung, "Why are you investing so much money in America?" They said, "Because you have the best workers in the world, and it's the safest investment I can make, is in America."

Now, semiconductors are investing literally hundreds of billions of dollars producing chips back home, here in America—your cities, your towns—so folks never have to leave home to get—excuse me—to get a good job.

And by the way, even with those historic investments that we've made over the last 3 years, we still reduced the deficit during this whole period. All those investments, we still reduced the deficit by \$1 trillion.

And look, you all—a lot of you come from places like I grew up in, where there used to be that factory that employed 3,000, 2,000, 1,500 people. All of a sudden, it closed down. It was there for generations. People lost heart. People lost a sense of—literally, a sense of loss. And it's particularly those of you from the near-Midwest and the Midwest. Look at all the factories that picked up and moved.

Well, our economic agenda has ignited a manufacturing boom though: a semiconductor boom, a battery boom, an electric vehicle boom. We're making things in America, in every part of America, creating millions of good-paying jobs. By the way, 800,000 new manufacturing jobs. And if you work more than—by the way, you know, these new factories, they call them—when they're for—to build these new—these chips manufacturing facilities, they have what they call "fabs" factories.

They look like—and I've seen them. They look like great, big football fields in a stadium—I mean, rectangular fields. And guess what? You don't need a college degree. You know what the average salary is? A hundred and ten thousand dollars working there.

And what happens? The first one is being built outside of Columbus, Ohio, in what I call the "Field of Dreams," a thousand acres there. What's happening there? Not only you build a factory, but you're going to end up having to build more filling stations, more beauty shops, more drugstores, more—everything moves when that's happening, when people have money to spend.

And it's clean, I might add. It's clean.

And when folks see shovels in the ground and people going to work on these projects, they can feel a sense of pride again.

Think what we did. Most of the major—I come from the corporate capital of the world—not a joke—Delaware. More corporations incorporated in Delaware than any—every other State in the Union combined—combined. And guess what? A lot of those corporations, they're not bad people, but they decided, "Let's go with the cheapest labor in the world." So they sent the jobs overseas—shut down the factories at home, sent the jobs overseas, and then imported the product.

Not anymore. We are sending product overseas, and we're importing the jobs. Pride in hometowns. I really mean it. Think about it. Think about it. What happens if you build up your—pride in America, pride in—people have pride when things start coming back—pride in knowing you can get big things done when your work together.

Look, folks, we know pride also means feeling safe in your neighborhoods. The fact that we've made enormous progress preventing and reducing crime through the American Rescue Plan. We've made one of the biggest investments in local public safety ever: over \$15 billion. And much of it has gone directly to you to hire for your departments.

You've done a tremendous job. You really have. You've done a tremendous job putting these resources to work. You know how to do it. And I'm not being solicitous. Mayors are the people who get things done: hiring more officers for accountable community policing, investing in violence intervention programs proven to reduce crime.

With your support, I also signed the first gun safety law in 30 years. And we're working with you to implement it, to coordinate these efforts and create the first-ever White House Office—I—we—what we did, my staff came along and said, you know, we need a White House Office dedicated to getting guns off the street and threatening—and treating the trauma from gun violence, because there's a lot of trauma as a consequence.

So we're deploying teams to meet with communities that have been victimized to make sure they get the help they need. Working—it's working because of you, the mayors. But we've got to do a lot more.

You know, some of you may remember, a woman named Dianne Feinstein and Joe Biden passed the first assault weapons ban back when I was a Senator. And mass shootings actually went down. So I'm still committed to banning assault weapons and high-capacity magazines. We've done it before, and we can do it again.

And we have to pass universal background checks. It doesn't violate the Second Amendment, for God's sake. I used to teach the Constitution at the University of Pennsylvania. Look, folks, the situation is simple. You know, when the—when we passed the Second Amendment, guess what? You weren't allowed to have a cannon. [*Laughter*] And you—no, I'm serious. Not a joke. You weren't allowed to have certain—you weren't—there were certain limitations of what you could have.

And I love—my friends and I come—the southern part of my State is very conservative, the Delmarva Peninsula. We talk at you like y'all talk sometimes. You know what I mean? *[Laughter]* But all kidding aside, it's just kind of amazing. They think that you could order—you could have anything. That never was the case. There's always been limitations on what you could purchase.

So, anyway, look—and I love people who say, "The blood of liberty"—or excuse me, the—excuse me—"The tree of liberty is watered with the blood of patriots." Well, guess what, man? I didn't see a whole lot of patriots that are out there walking around making sure that we have these weapons. Well—and if you really want to worry about the Government, you need an F-16. You don't need an AR-15. *[Laughter]*

No, I'm not—no, I'm serious. I mean, think about it. *[Laughter]* I'm not joking. Because that's one of the arguments made by the right, that we need to be able to protect ourselves against the Government.

Well, look——

Audience member. [Inaudible] [Laughter]

The President. If Jill were here, she'd say, "Joe, hush up, boy." *[Laughter]*

Across the country, violent crime is at—rates are falling. In some cities, it's going up, but overall—but not everywhere—overall, we are—we—they're falling, these rates—down nearly in every major category. Record declines in homicide. It matters.

And at some time, we've invested, in the last little bit, billions in improving mental health services to extend care, boost coverage, and address the causes of addiction and mental health issues. We're expanding mobile crisis services and community clinics. We're helping schools hire 1,400 new counselors. Mental health care is health care. It's health care. It's no different if you broke your arm, if you need help. We have a moral obligation to have our folks' backs.

And I want to thank you all—I mean it sincerely—I want to thank you all for what you're doing to support mental health all across the country. And that—the same is true for the fight to end homelessness and move people into supportive and permanent housing. We're your partner in this work.

We've got a lot more to do, I know. Across the country, I—a record 1 million new housing units under are—are under construction today. We're expanding our rental assistance to over 100,000 additional families, the biggest increase in 20 years, and have been working to cut red tape to make it easy for people to access Federal housing benefits.

You know, I've sent Congress an ambitious plan to do more: lowering housing costs, helping you build affordable housing, provide assistance for renters and first-time homebuyers.

And by the way, most of you come from families like mine. We weren't poor, but you know, we lived in a three-bedroom, split-level home when we moved to Delaware with four kids and a grandpop. We lived in a decent neighborhood; it was safe. But it wasn't what you'd call luxurious. And there wasn't much leftover.

My dad used to say: "Joey, you know, a job is about a lot more than a paycheck. It's about decency. It's about respect. It's about being able to look your kid in the eye and say, 'Honey, everything is going to be okay,' and mean it."

Well, guess what? What we're doing is saving the Government money. Providing assistance for renters, first-time homebuyers, that's how people build equity. You build equity in your home, that's how you build wealth. So let's keep pushing, pass the plan into law.

And I want to talk about another top issue: the border. Now, I love how I turn on and: "Biden is for a free open border. Just tear down everything. Let everybody come, no restrictions." Well, one—I—used to be a bipartisan issue in this country, and it should be one again.

I've been clear from the very beginning: The system is broken. My first day in office, I sent Congress a comprehensive plan on immigration reform. My friends on the other side have done nothing with that.

Over and over, I've asked for resources to step up action at the border. In October, I asked Congress to fund—for funding that would add another 20 additional border—twenty—2,000 additional border agents and officers, hundreds of new immigration judges to make the judgments on the spot, a new—new detection equipment to stop fentanyl from coming into the country.

And by the way, I've worked with China and Mexico to slow the flow of fentanyl into the United States. As I speak, it's way down.

So let me be clear. My team has been at the table for weeks now on a partisan—with a bipartisan group of Senators to negotiate a deal, including border, because I believe we need significant policy changes at the border, including changes in our asylum system to ensure that we have authorities we need to control the border. And I'm ready to act.

I think—hope—"God willing and the crick not rising," as my grandpop would say—you know, I think next week, we ought to be able to work out something, at least in the Senate. And I'm hopeful it's going to be the bipartisan package the Senate is going to pass, God willing.

Now, the question is for the Speaker and the House Republicans: Are they ready to act as well? They have to choose whether they want to solve a problem or keep weaponizing the issue to score political points against the President. I'm ready to solve the problem. I really am. Massive changes—and I mean it sincerely.

Today, folks in America, with the incredible help of you mayors, we've created 14 million new jobs—14 million new jobs. Americans have filed 16—filed 16 new—16 million new business applications since I became President. That's a record. And every single one of them—think about it—it's an act of hope. Someone says they want to risk everything and open a new business, it's an act of hope.

Wages are rising. So is household wealth. We have the lowest inflation rate and the fastest recovery of any major economy in the world. And that's a fact.

In fact, today, costs are down on everything from a gallon of gas to a carton of milk. You know—I mean, look, I was down in Raleigh, as I said, the other day. I didn't pass by a gas station that wasn't under 3 bucks: \$2.99, \$2.87. I mean, come on.

And, folks—folks are starting to see it. Today I learned that consumer sentiment—and you guys saw it—surged by 29 percent in the last 2 months, the biggest 2-month jump in 30 years. We've got more to do. And that's not all though. We're lowering the costs of—for working class families across the board.

And by the way, it used to drive my dad crazy. My dad was a hard-working guy, an honest man who didn't get a chance to go to college because of the war, but he was a well-read guy. And the thing that bothered my dad more than anything else was what I call junk fees, the add-on fee by a corporation or a business just because they could do it.

For example, we're going after junk fees like banning banks and credit unions from charging fees for basic services, like checking your account balance. To check your account balance, you get a bill for 30 bucks. Come on. Or retrieving your bank records, 50 bucks. Some banks charge

as much as, I said, 30 to 50 bucks for the services. But not anymore. For families like mine, that extra 30 bucks mattered when I was growing up.

And speaking of not—being not fair, without the help of a single person on the other side, we finally were able to reduce the exorbitant cost of prescription drugs. Any prescription—any one you're taking for any purpose in your town, you give me that prescription, and if I had the ability, I would take it to Ontario or Paris or Belgium and get it for anywhere from 60- to 30-percent less. Same company, same pharmacy, same pharmaceutical company, but that much less.

Look, folks, we finally allowed Medicare to negotiate drug prices. I've been fighting that as a Senator for my whole 2,000-year career. *[Laughter]* Just like VA has been able to do for decades.

Insulin now—if you have diabetes, insulin is now cast—capped at \$35 for seniors on Medicare—*[applause]*—after being average of \$400. They're saving hundreds of dollars a month.

And by the way, starting next year, out-of-pocket drug costs for seniors on Medicare is going to be capped at, total—no matter what—how many—no matter what the cost of your—you're paying, everything will be—you can't—don't have to pay more than \$2,000 a year for every—and even the expensive cancer drugs, which costs \$14-, \$16,000 a year.

Folks, I'm going to keep fighting to lower costs for families across the board.

And by the way, guess what? I love it. They say, "Well, you're spending all that money." Guess what? That's money saved, billions of dollars the Federal Government does not have to pay, billions and billions of dollars. And that's a fact.

By the way, you know how much it costs to make that insulin? The guy who invented it didn't want to patent it because he wanted it available for everybody. You know how much it costs to make it? Ten dollars—t-e-n. Package it every way, add all the costs you could possibly think, another \$2, maybe \$3. And they're charging 400 bucks for it? Come on, man. *[Laughter]* No, I'm serious. I'm not joking.

But it saves the Government money. It's not the Government spending money. It saves the Federal Government billions of dollars a year—billions. And it's going to save more. We have more work to do, but we're going to keep moving forward together and, God willing, as partners.

Take student debt relief for public servants. You know, I know I wanted to forgive all student debt, and the Supreme Court said, no, I didn't have the authority to do that. Okay. But then I realized there's a public service requirement out there. If you engaged in public service for a serious amount of time—and by the way, the reason why any of you—I'm sure none—I'm not going to ask you if you have it.

Anybody had to pay for student debt for yourself and/or a kid or anyone, raise your hand. Guess what? The interest you're paying is more than, in fact, what the—the original bill was. Already, I've been able to forgive the debt for 3.7 million people who have gotten debt relief.

And by the way, when I originally got this passed, it was for everybody. And you didn't have to be a senior. For everybody. But my team was unable to get passed—I didn't have a bunch of mayors. I had a bunch of Senators and Congressmen. *[Laughter]*

But all kidding aside, you know, I met yesterday in Raleigh with a dad, who was an impressive guy. And he was a Principal of the Year—picked as a Principal of the Year in his State. He had two young boys. He lived in a lovely small home. And—but he had a debt that—that was \$124,000—student debt, much of it interest. And he never stopped paying, but he always kept his payments going—kept going up.

Well, guess what? That debt is now forgiven. And by the way, he's a former high school principal and now an executive coach for school—for a school district, teaching principals. He said this debt relief was a game changer for he and his family and his two boys I met.

One—I mean, their—I sat with them in their—in their kitchen for—and their dining room for the better part of 2 hours. Now he can stay in a town that he loves, take care of his children in a way that they're able to meet the basic needs he has.

It's not only fair, but it grows the economy. It grows the economy. So many who are being able to pay off their student debt are now able to go out and go buy a home, invest in a business, invest in other things and their families—to grow their families.

And, quite frankly, you, the mayors, are the key to all of this. I'm not blaming you if you don't want to be—take credit for it. But the point is—look, the fact is, you're the ones responsible. You're the ones people listen to. You talk to people. You speak plain English or Spanish or whatever language they're speaking, and you're able to speak to them directly, and you explain in simple language what we're doing.

Because, otherwise, people get really, really, really confused. We talk about—you know, for example, in the speech they put together for me to talk about the supplemental. Bless me, Father, for I have sinned.

[The President made the sign of the cross.]

[Laughter] You all know what I mean, the supplemental request I'm making to spend money. But no one knows what—I mean, people are busting their neck. Whether or not they have a college degree or not, you talk about a supplemental, "What are you talking about?" We've got to speak plain language to people. And that's what you do.

Look, let me close with this. Last week, I visited a small-business community owners near Allentown, Pennsylvania. Almost—almost Scranton—almost. *[Laughter]* Close.

Audience member. It's close.

The President. Almost Scranton. And if you notice, those of us who—everybody is from Scranton these days. *[Laughter]*

But you know, in my family—my mother, who was—married my dad when she was 24 years old, I guess lived in Scranton for those 20-some years and maybe another 10. My mother was in Delaware for 35 years, and then she'd be somewhere, and they'd say, "Where are you from, ma'am?" She'd say, "I'm from Scranton." *[Laughter]*

But look, they remind me how much our work matters. They said, back in 2020, when we were down, that they lost businesses, and they lost—this is in Allentown, all these folks I met. I met with business leaders, a bike owner, a—shop owner, et cetera. But then the laws we passed, they said, the work they'd all done together, helped them get back on their feet. They're able to support more cops, more firefighters in their community; more savings for health insurance because of the work we've done; more opportunities in manufacturing, infrastructure; new jobs, new businesses, and a new cycle of hope.

I know that sounds corny, but you're probably the only group who fully understand it. What do you want to give people who are hurting the most? Genuine hope—hope they can get something done, that there's a way out.

Places like Allentown, once left behind, are now coming back. I mean, for real. The folks I met in your cities and towns—*[applause]*—the folks I met in your cities and towns are a big reason why I've never been more optimistic about our Nation's future.

Like I said, I know I only look like I'm 40, but a little more than that. *[Laughter]* All kidding aside, I've been around a long time.

And I'm—I've never been more optimistic in my whole life about the prospects for America, relative to every other nation in the world. You know all the talk—I'm supposedly an expert on foreign policy because I've been doing it so much. Well, let me tell you, remember everybody said China is going to eat us alive? Give me a break. *[Laughter]*

China has got more problems than, as my dad used to say, Carter has little liver pills. *[Laughter]* I don't want them to do badly, but I don't—I want them to play fairly.

We're just—we're more—look where Russia is. Russia has lost 300,000 forces. I mean, we are now, if we don't lose our footing, in the most powerful position we've been since the end of World War II. We had that postwar period where we knew exactly what we were talking about.

But now—think about it—if we're able to maintain support for Ukraine so they don't fall, as Henry Kissinger—Henry Kissinger called me—asked me to call him about three weeks before he died. And I was a young Senator when he was the Secretary of State, so we had our run-ins and our agreements and disagreements. And he said, in one part of the conversation was—when I called, he said, "You know, not since Napoleon—not since Napoleon—in France has Europe looked at Russia without fear until now."

If we walk away—if we walk away—and Russia is able to sustain their onslaught and bring down Ukraine, what do you think is going to happen in the Balkan countries? What do you think is going to happen from Poland to Hungary and Orbán? I mean, seriously, think about it. It changes the dynamic, magnificent—I won't get on this—I'm not supposed to be talking about this, but same thing with regard to Israel.

Israel has to taper this off. There's ways to put this together. We're in a position where we're unable to—I think one of the reasons the Houthi—I can't prove this—one of the reasons the— Hamas did what they did was I was about to work out a deal with Saudi Arabia, wanting to normalize relations. I mean, fully normalize relations with Israel and bring along six other Arab nations to change the dynamic in the region.

Some of you attended the G-20 and—the 20 largest countries—the 20 heads of states from the major countries of the world. I got a resolution passed. Everybody thought I was nuts. Said that we're going to build a railroad from Riyadh all the way to England, going underwater—not with the railroad, but a pipeline through—it's going to go from Riyadh to Saudi Arabia to Jordan to Israel to so on and so forth.

Why? Because everybody understands their interest is better met when they had this interconnection economically.

Well, guess what? We have to remember—I'm going on too long. I apologize. But—*[laughter]*—we have to remember—I mean this from the bottom of my heart—we've got to remember who the hell we are. We are the United States of America. There is nothing beyond our capacity—nothing, nothing, nothing—when we've been—done it together. Nothing.

We're the only nation in the world—think about this—that's come out of every crisis stronger than we went in—no other nation in the world has done—because we've worked together. And the thing I love about you guys is you work together.

We're going to get this done, folks.

I want to now turn it over—*[applause]*.

My grandfather—God bless you all. Now I'm going to turn it over to Tom, who's going—I'm going to take a few questions.

Office of Intergovernmental Affairs Director Thomas E. Perez. Thank you, Mr. President. Can we give it up for Mr. President?

Audience members. Four more years! Four more years! Four more years!

Director Perez. The questions are over, Mr. President. *[Laughter]*

We're going to first turn to Mayor Holt of the great city of Oklahoma City.

Crime/Economic Stimulus Legislation/Gun Control

Mayor David Holt of Oklahoma City, OK. Thank you, Tom.

The President. I want the record to show he didn't have to say, "Four more years." He's a Republican. *[Laughter]*

Mayor Holt. Mr. President, I know I speak for this bipartisan room of mayors when I thank you for having us here today. Thank you for the very deep participation that your administration has had in our meeting these last 3 days. And, most importantly, thank you for your obvious commitment to our urban priorities these last 3 years. We're so very grateful.

I want to ask a quick question. You alluded to this a little bit. I think I can give you an opportunity to expand on it. Obviously, as mayors, we face countless challenges and opportunities. But it seems that, at the end of the day, the most important one is always public safety. Obviously, public safety and law enforcement is often thought to fall under the jurisdiction of local government, but we have long had a partnership with the Federal Government in that.

And I think we'd all just love to hear—obviously, we're gratified, as you alluded to, that crime rates have fallen across the country this past year. But I think we'd all love to hear: What are your thoughts and plans moving forward for how the Federal Government can partner with cities to continue that momentum and to help us keep our communities safe?

The President. Well, thank you, Mr. Mayor. Look, I spent a significant portion of my career as chairman of the Judiciary Committee, which did almost all the crime legislation that exists. And in the last administration—in 2020, for example, we had the largest increase in murders we've ever had in all of America. Not blaming it on the—that President, particularly.

But think about what was happening. We had a lot of crises going on. We had the whole—the beginning of the pandemic, which wasn't being acted on. We had a lot of people just very, very upset, worrying about where they were. Mental health was deteriorating.

And so, when I got elected, I acted to turn it around. And so have you. In 2023, violent crime came down significantly. It's one of the largest yearly declines of homicide ever.

And the American Rescue Plan, which was a very, very big facility for you guys to draw on, was one of the largest investments in public safety ever. More police officers were put on the beat, invested in violence prevention, and it was because you did it and you made—you had the money, and you made the investment.

And I signed—we signed the first meaningful bipartisan gun safety legislation. It still helped a lot, these phony gun—anyway. A whole—I won't go into it. But you did a whole lot.

But mainly, we were able to bring more police officers on and raise the standard—raise the standard—expected of them. I—anyway.

But you know, we're in the—it took executive action to keep illegal guns out of our cities, and that's what we're doing. And you're doing it as well. And I need—look, more is needed. A hundred thousand more community police officers on the beat, I think, is what's needed nationwide—another hundred thousand.

And we have to fund mental health counselors. You know, what we found is that if in fact—you know where most law enforcement officers are getting killed? Responding to domestic violence. You know, we expect our cops to do everything. We except them to be counselors, we expect them to be psychologists, we expect them to be tough guys and women.

But you know, the—what you want to do, you want to have someone stop—trying to stop someone from jumping off the top of the roof, you need somebody who has a background and expertise. So we're hiring into the police departments people with different skills than just being able to tote a gun and physically protect.

And so I think that, you know, one of the reasons I appointed Vivek Murthy—Admiral Murphy to become this—the Solicitor—excuse me, become the guy in charge of the whole mental health piece of this operation is because he understands it. And he talks all the time about what we can do to engage in providing for mental health facilities around the world—around your cities and communities so people can have the help they need.

And look, you know, we—and look, I know it's very controversial. I know it's a red, hot-button issue for a lot of Democrats and Republicans. I come from a State that, back when I was a Senator, had—I think it was the third highest gun ownership in America. And I don't know what it is now, but—because of a lot of duck hunting in the Delmarva Peninsula and a lot of other reasons.

And I know how unpopular it was when I started talking about banning assault weapons. Who needs an AR-15 that can hold a hundred rounds? Not a joke.

I was campaigning when I was running for reelection as the last time as a Senator, and I was down in the Delmarva Peninsula, just on the Maryland border, in where—in the swampy area, a lot of—and I'm walking through, and that's how—like you guys do. You campaign. You go where the people are.

I go through—and so I'm walking through in a pair of high boots, and a guy said, "Biden, you SOB,"—[*laughter*]—and I said, "What?" He said, "You want to take my gun away." And I said, "I don't want to take"—he was fishing. And I said, "I don't want to take your gun away." I said, "You're able to have your gun." He said, "You want to take my AR-15." I said, "You must be one hell of a lousy hunter." [*Laughter*]

And he looked at me, and he said, "What do you mean?" I said, "You need an AR-15 that's basically a semi-automatic and can fact—fire off 20, 30, 50, 60 rounds?" I said, "My—the best—last time I checked, deer weren't wearing Kevlar vests." [*Laughter*] And we just—got in the—and then he calmed down, got into conversation, started talking practically about what, in fact, happens—what, in fact, happens.

And you know, the other thing is background checks. There's always been a requirement of a background check. And now this 16-year-old kid who was able to buy an AR-15—anyway.

So I think we have to support community violence intervention programs as well. Many of you have those programs going in your cities, in your communities. And you're seeing they work. You get people engaged, and you get them involved.

And so there's a lot we can do—I think a lot more we can do. But two of the things are making sure there's background checks for people to purchase weapons, number one. And, number two, certain weapons you shouldn't be able to purchase because you never have—you're never—you're not able to go out and purchase a machinegun. I mean—anyway.

There's certain basic principles that are made—just make common sense. And I think—and, again, you can go back and look—if you want, I'll send you a copy of the study we did after the—the assault weapons ban lapsed, because it only could last for 10 years. I couldn't get it done

again. And it's interesting. The number of mass shootings dropped precipitously—dropped precipitously—when we had that limitation. It doesn't solve every problem. It's one of the things we can do.

But any rate, there's a lot more to say. I'm probably already saying too much.

Director Perez. Our second and last question comes from Mayor Katie Rosenberg from the great city of Wausau, Wisconsin.

Lead Service Line Replacement Efforts/Drinking Water Safety

Mayor Katie Rosenberg of Wausau, Wisconsin. Thank you so much. This is an absolute honor. Thank you for hosting us. You have a wonderful staff.

Just about a year ago, the Vice President hosted a lead pipe summit here in Washington. And I attended that, and it was like shooting me out of a cannon. I ran home, and we started working on our plan to shore up, pull out all of those lead pipes, and we made our plan—a 15-year plan down to a 5-year plan.

But I'm curious, what other progress are we seeing about these lead pipes being removed across our Nation? It's really important that we get that out of our drinking water. Thank you.

The President. Well, first of all, thank you for what you're doing. I agree with you.

Let me put this in perspective. The research by the doc shows that reducing lead exposure for children has—this is a study that was done—[inaudible]—has the same effect on test scores—just take test scores at school—on test scores as reducing class size from 22 to 15 students and less—one-tenth of the cost. Let me just give you one example of the impact it has on IQ formation and the ability to think and the like. So it's a significantly smart investment, number one.

Number two, we have enough money, and we're going to eliminate every lead pipe in America. Every one.

It's going to take us—it's going to take us about 10 years, but every single one. Because you shouldn't—think about it. You've got 400,000 schools, kids going to the water fountain and drinking water—you know, water. You got so much else that's going on. And it can just—and it makes a lot of sense.

And by the way, it creates a hell of a lot of jobs too. [Laughter]

But my point is, it just is—look, exposure to lead impacts on brain development—we know that, particularly for as it's developing—a hazard to the health of people, it can damage the brain and the kidneys and interferes with the production of blood—of red blood cells that need to carry the hydrogen. And studies show that lead exposure hurts cognitive function in children and can even knock off several points of their IQ.

Despite these dangers—the knowledge of how dangerous this is, we're in effect—where the CDC estimates that over half of American children could be exposed to lead, with the exposure often coming from their own homes with lead pipes. And it costs a hell of a lot of money to take that pipe from the watermain to the house. It costs a lot of money. A lot of people can't even remotely afford doing it.

But everybody is better off—everybody is better off—when we get the lead pipes out of the system. And look, our ambitious goal is to remove all lead pipes in America by—within 10 years. The bipartisan infrastructure law financed over 1,200 drinking water and wastewater projects, and it's going to replace hundreds of thousands of lead service lines in America beginning right away.

Ongoing efforts in cities like Wausau and Philadelphia and Newark, New Jersey. They create good-paying jobs as well—good-paying jobs.

And I visited the Hero Plumbing in Milwaukee, by the way, a Black-owned small business that was—replaced over 600 lead pipes in homes and daycare centers.

Well, guess what? Ten-year effort to bring these—is to bring these States, Tribes, and labor unions water utilities and private companies together to deliver clean drinking water to every community in the world—in America. And so it just seems to me that it's one of those things—who the hell can be against clean water? Except some of the people I know. But—[*laughter*].

But all kidding aside, if there's anything you're going to expend money on, you want to increase the prospect of growth in schools, I mean, this was a—that study, extensive study done. It makes a big difference in terms of the ability to learn and ability—and long-term impacts on cognitive capability.

But I'm convinced we can get it done. I'm convinced we can get it done.

Thank you all very much. You're very patient. Thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

You're all welcome to spend the night. [*Laughter*]

By the way, have you—have you had a chance to see most of the White House yet? Not all the—well, you ought to take—I don't know, I might get myself in trouble here. [*Laughter*]

But you know, there's—downstairs, there's a lot of interesting rooms you can check out. And up here, the dangerous part of up here is that it's hard to know what room you're in because all of them are identified by color. [*Laughter*] The Red Room, the Blue Room, the Green Room—it's not—

But all kidding aside, welcome to the White House. This is your house, and I was getting in the elevator to come up, and my introducer—where is she? There she is. I said every time that I hear "Hail to the Chief," I wonder, "Where the hell is he?" [*Laughter*]

Mayor Hillary L. Schieve of Reno, NV. [*Inaudible*—playing your song.

The President. That's right.

Mayor Schieve. That's what my sister says about me being mayor. [*Laughter*]

The President. Anyway, thank you, thank you, thank you for everything you do.

NOTE: The President spoke at 4:05 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to former Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg of New York City; former Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms of Atlanta, GA, in her former capacity as Senior Adviser and Director of the Office of Public Engagement; Senior Adviser and Director of the Office of Public Engagement Stephen K. Benjamin, in his former capacity as mayor of Columbia, SC; former Mayor Mitchell J. Landrieu of New Orleans, LA, in his former capacity as Senior Adviser and Infrastructure Implementation Coordinator; former Mayor Martin J. Walsh of Boston, MA, in his former capacity as Secretary of Labor; Secretary Buttigieg, in his former capacity as mayor of South Bend, IN; Speaker of the House of Representatives J. Michael Johnson; Heather and Chad Balliet, owners, South Mountain Cycle in Emmaus, PA; former President Donald J. Trump; Prime Minister Victor Orbán of Hungary; and U.S. Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy. He also referred to H.R. 2872, Further Additional Continuing Appropriations and Other Extensions Act, 2024, which was approved January 19 and assigned Public Law No. 118–35; and his brothers James and Francis Biden and sister Valerie Biden Owens. Mayor Schieve referred to her sister Amanda Schieve-Crawford. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on January 20.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : U.S. Conference of Mayors, remarks and question-and-answer session.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Balliet, Chad; Balliet, Heather; Benjamin, Stephen K.; Biden, Francis W.; Biden, James B.; Biden, Jill T.; Bloomberg, Michael R.; Bottoms, Keisha Lance; Buttigieg, Peter P.M.; Cochran, Tom; Holt, David; Johnson, J. Michael; Landrieu, Mitchell J.; Murthy, Vivek H.; Orbán, Victor; Owens, Valerie Biden; Perez, Thomas E.; Rosenberg, Katie; Schieve, Hillary L.; Trump, Donald J.; Walsh, Martin J.

Subjects: Bipartisanship; Border security; Broadband and wireless technologies; Climate change; Community policing programs, improvement efforts; COVID–19 pandemic; Criminal background check procedures, strengthening efforts; Drinking water, safety improvement efforts; Drug and alcohol addiction, treatment and reduction efforts; Economic improvement; Economic stimulus legislation; Environmental justice; Federal student loans, partial forgiveness; Firearm rights; Further Additional Continuing Appropriations and Other Extensions Act, 2024; Gasoline costs; Gaza, conflict with Israel; Group of Twenty (G–20) nations; Gun control efforts; Gun violence, prevention efforts; Hamas political-paramilitary organization; Homelessness, prevention and reduction efforts; Housing, affordability and access; Hungary, Prime Minister; Immigration reform; India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor; Inflation; Infrastructure improvements; Insulin cost controls; Israel, military operations in Gaza; Job creation and growth; Junk fees imposed on consumers, prevention efforts; Lead service lines, replacement efforts; Manufacturing industry, domestic investment; Mayors, U.S. Conference of; Medicare and Medicaid programs; Mental health programs and services; Middle East, regional integration and security; Natural disasters, climate change impacts; Office of Gun Violence Prevention; Office of Intergovernmental Affairs; Office of Public Engagement; Opioid epidemic, efforts to combat; Prescription drug costs, reduction efforts; Public Service Loan Forgiveness program; Rail infrastructure, improvement efforts; Renewable energy sources and technologies; Rental assistance; Russia, conflict in Ukraine; Secretary of Transportation; Semiconductor manufacturing; Small businesses, promotion efforts; Speaker of the House of Representatives; State and local law enforcement, Federal support; U.S. Surgeon General; Ukraine, Russian invasion and airstrikes; Water management policy, improvement efforts.

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